

Think Twice, Dig Once

By Dennis Hinkamp

You know how much you hate moving. You have to box up everything, have the garage sale and clean the oven. Plants hate to move just as much as you do.

Transplanting certain plants from one place to another can be tricky and expensive, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “I know one individual paid \$10,000 to have a mature palm tree moved into his backyard. It was a waste of good money, not to mention the waste of the palm tree, which died a year or two later. Mature trees have been moved successfully, but many also drop dead while trying to get established in their new location.”

In general, trees and shrubs located in an area only a year or two are easier to move than those established for some time, Goodspeed says. Larger trees can be moved but require a professional nursery and a hydraulic tree spade.

The trick to moving large or small trees or shrubs is taking as many roots as possible with the root ball, he says. “This can be accomplished by digging a Kennecott- Copper-mine-sized ball or by helping the plant develop roots around the base so a smaller root ball will suffice.”

Normally, plants send out roots several feet in search of nutrients and water, he explains. Some trees extend their roots a hundred feet or more. One way to encourage root growth around the base of the tree is to prune some roots at least a month or two before moving the tree. Root pruning severs the roots near the trunk and encourages root development around the base. This allows the plant to maintain some roots for water and nutrient uptake while growing new fibrous roots.

“The area around the base of the tree you plan to move should be divided into thirds,” he says. “Then, dig trenches to cut approximately a third of the roots. These trenches should be dug 18 inches deep. Ideally, the second third of the plant’s roots should be cut a few months later, preparing it for moving in about two to four months.”

“Four months is adequate, but a year is better,” he adds “This gives the plant time to grow some fibrous roots that can be moved with the tree. The best time to transplant a tree or shrub is in the fall or early spring.”

When the moving day finally arrives, first dig the hole for the plant’s new home, Goodspeed says. Then dig the tree or shrub, taking as much soil and as big a root ball as possible. If the plant has been root pruned, removal will be easier because the majority of the larger roots will already be cut. Once the root ball is free from the surrounding soil, wrap it tightly with burlap, cloth or another material. This helps maintain the integrity of the soil ball.

Carefully place the ball in the new location and slowly remove the material holding it together, he says. Try to disrupt the roots as little as possible. Place the plant in the new hole at the same

soil level on the trunk as it grew in the past. If it is planted too deeply it will struggle to survive and possibly die. After back filling with the native soil, be sure to water the new transplant deeply and regularly until it is established.

“It may take a while for the root system to develop and fill in, so it may be necessary to stake it temporarily,” he says. “Be sure the support is loose and allows the tree to move with the wind. The staking system should be removed as soon as possible.

Do not fertilize the plant its first year in the new location. Excess top growth can be detrimental, Goodspeed cautions. If some branches die back, remove them. Evergreens that are moved may need their foliage misted or sprayed regularly to keep from desiccating. Within a year or two the plant should be established and accustomed to its new surroundings.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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